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On-the-Job Information Literacy:

A Case Study of Student Employees at Purdue University Archives and Special Collections

Tracy Grimm and Neal Harmeyer

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Introduction

Information literacy as a set of skills, developed over time, is ideally integrated into a variety of aspects of a student's academic experience. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* "envision[s] information literacy as extending the arc of learning throughout students' academic careers and as converging with other academic and social learning goals" (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). With an eye to the development of integrated abilities, a perhaps overlooked yet promising avenue for librarians, library staff, and academic archivists to contribute to the development of student information literacy exists outside the classroom and inside of our libraries and archives or special collections units. Nearly all academic libraries employ student workers each year. This chapter examines Purdue University Archives and Special Collections as a case study in which information literacy outcomes emerge parallel to classroom learning through student worker on-the-job experiential learning in the archives. The analysis outlines the relationship of the *Framework* and student employment in academic archives as well as potential benefits of a conscientious approach to student employee training and mentoring.

Student library employment is an outside-the-classroom opportunity for students to gain footholds in the *Framework* concepts such as Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, and Research as Inquiry. Student employment in an academic library, archives, and special collections immerses students in the operations of a library or primary source repository, where they typically assist with the everyday processes of scholarly communication, facilitating new scholarship creation, conducting source analysis and evaluation, and responding to inquiry. At its core, student employment may be conceptualized as a co-curricular activity, a unique opportunity for career preparedness, and an extension of academic experience designed to provide experiential learning in information literacy.

Background

Purdue University Archives and Special Collections (ASC) is a unit of Purdue University Libraries on a campus of more than 40,000 students in West Lafayette, Indiana. The mission of Archives and Special Collections is “to support the discovery, learning, and engagement goals of Purdue University by identifying, collecting, preserving, and making available for research records and papers of enduring value created or received by the University and its employees.” In addition to the director, ASC employs eight full-time professional archivists, including four subject-specific archivists (flight and space exploration, psychoactive substances, university history, and women’s studies) and two other professional staff as well as several graduate and undergraduate student workers. In addition to collection development and preservation activities, ASC archivists curate multiple exhibitions annually, manage and staff the reading room, co-instruct with university faculty, create digital preservation strategies and policy, and teach archival literacy course units and sessions in a specialized classroom.

Literature Review

It is not uncommon for full-time students to be employed on campus during part or all of their academic careers. Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics on college student employment cites 43% of full-time undergraduate students in 2015 as being employed (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2017). Academic libraries and archives have a history of supplementing staffing needs with student workers. The library literature reflects this history with earlier studies and articles on managing and retaining student workers, such as Maria Bagshaw’s “Keep your Student Workers” (Bagshaw, 2006). To reduce costly turnover rates while working within restrained library budgets, Bagshaw shared essential managerial steps to retain good student workers. Bagshaw found that taking the time and effort to train students as integral members of the staff, assigning them tasks they can master and repeat combined with sometimes challenging assignments, and showing appreciation are necessary to keep student workers happy and engaged. More recent articles suggest academic libraries have a responsibility to go beyond steps to improve retention by intentionally providing pre-professional skills development to student employees and that campus employment be considered less as merely time students are drawn away from their academic work and more as opportunities for enhanced learning as high-impact practices.

Several authors view student employment as a factor that can contribute to student success (Markgraf, 2015; Kuh, 2010; Melilli, Mitola, & Hunsaker, 2016). Kuh (2010) calls for undergraduate employers at academic institutions to make work more relevant to coursework and at the same time for faculty to make coursework more connected to students' work.

Melilli, Mitola, and Hunsaker (2016) point to the University of Nevada Las Vegas' University Libraries Student Assistant Professional Development Workshop Program as an example of a program that provides professional development for student employees to improve their career readiness. Markgraf (2015) makes a strong case for student library jobs as high-impact practices alongside other practices such as learning communities, undergraduate research, internships, and field placements. Pointing to the University of Iowa's Guided Reflection on Work (IOWA GROW) program as a model for bridging student academic work and campus jobs, Markgraf (2015) argues that librarians are uniquely positioned "in the middle" to help students build connections between in-class work and their library employment. She notes that librarians already often hold instructor roles and collaborate with teaching faculty to support student success, positioning librarians as potential mediators amid coursework and experiential learning in a workplace where they may supervise library student workers. Markgraf (2015) aptly notes, "The relationship that student employees have with their supervisors and colleagues may be among the most sustained interactions they have with the institution during their college careers" (p. 771). The same is true for academic archivists and special collections librarians who supervise student workers. Archivists and special collections librarians also often hold "in the middle" positions as instructors of information and archival literacy between teaching faculty, students, and information; in the case of archivists, the aforementioned information is based within primary source collections.

The relationship of information literacy guidelines specific to the instruction that takes place in an academic archives bears brief overview. The *Framework* defines information literacy broadly as "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning" (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). Primary source literacy and archival literacy, along with other specific literacies such as data literacy and visual literacy, can be thought of as specialized literacies within information literacy. A joint task force of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) recently published "Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy," which articulates core ideas and learning objectives for primary source literacy. The guidelines identify primary source literacy as "the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within specific disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge or to revise existing understandings" (ACRL/SAA, January 2018 revision, p. 2). Archival literacy, while related to primary source literacy, is broader in scope. Archival literacy is a set of abilities that includes primary source literacy as well as more advanced understandings, such as where and how archival collections derive and exist and the complex relationships necessary to understand and evaluate their value and relevance as information critical to original research and new scholarship (see Yakel & Malkmus in Prom & Hinchliffe, 2016, p. 9–12). Yakel and Malkmus place primary and archival literacy solidly among the library profession's information

literacy guidelines and point to a number of intersections. They tie the 2015 *Framework's* Information Creation as a Process concept to archival provenance and the importance of understanding the context of record creation, and the Information Has Value threshold concept to the importance of students understanding the process of archival selection and appraisal as an important consideration when evaluating for bias and gaps in the historical record. Students assist with the intake of archival collections, description, analysis, and providing access to those collections. As a result, archives' student workers directly encounter and act upon these literacies in many day-to-day tasks.

When student employment relates to students' field of study, our experience shows students have a high acceptance rate for competitive internships, graduate school admissions, and post-graduate employment. Indeed, Geel and Backes-Gellner (2012) examined how full-time student employment affects short-term and long-term professional employment and found that employment can complement rather than negatively impact student success. Students who worked in field-related jobs while in school full time incurred higher labor market outcomes after graduation. Their study found those higher outcomes included "lower unemployment risks, shorter job-search duration, higher wage effects, and greater job responsibility" (p. 325).

However, only one study could be located that examined student library employment and information literacy (Folk, 2014), and no studies could be found on the relationship between information or archival literacy and student employment in academic archives. One article found in the archival literature relates to student employment in archives, but its focus was on how archives were utilizing student workers, recruitment, and personnel management of undergraduate employees and how to train undergraduates so they are effective in their tasks (Floyd & Oram, 1992). Regardless, student employment in an academic archives shares many characteristics of other high-impact practices and possesses great potential for improving students' information and archival literacy skills.

Case Study

Purdue University Archives and Special Collections employs students each fiscal year (July 1–June 30); the number of student employees and total student work hours varies, depending upon funding and needs. These student assistants hold majors or minor courses of study in areas such as computer science, linguistics, history, engineering, speech pathology, philosophy, and agriculture.

Table 6.1.
Number of students for the past four fiscal years, 2014–15 to 2017–18.

Year	Total Student Employees	Undergraduate Student Employees	Graduate Student Employees
2014–2015	13	5	8
2015–2016	19	9	10
2016–2017	18	12	6
2017–2018	24	19	5

Archivists at Purdue University Archives and Special Collections approach hiring students with the belief that the work a student assistant conducts for the institution is equally as important as the pre-professional experience; it must help these students prepare for their chosen field or any other interests with confidence and thoughtful approaches. Student assistants are prompted to engage in most facets of working in a library or cultural heritage institution. All assistants are expected to interact with the public, conduct themselves in a professional manner, maintain a strong work ethic, be analytical, and communicate well both verbally and in writing. A successful student work experience begins by fostering a sense of community and mutual respect. Students are paid for their contributions and acknowledged for their achievements, such as named inclusion as the author of a collection description or an invitation to join an archivist to meet with a collection donor. Student assistants are colleagues, and all are recognized for their labor.

Each student assistant receives training in their first week of employment and regular guidance thereafter. During initial training, a combination of scholarly literature and archival blog post readings and in-person demonstrations takes place, with the student supervisor and student engaging in one-on-one discussions about the mission, functions, and goals of the institution. This training time is not formalized through a written or verbal examination; it is up to the supervisor to ascertain the readiness of the student to begin their work. The underlying goals behind this introductory period is scaffolded threefold: first, to provide familiarity with the terminology, concepts, and professional rigor; second, to allow a time for the student to become comfortable with fellow employees and the environment; and finally, to allow the supervisor and student assistant a pressure-free period to know one another.

Student employees take part in a wide range of projects. Beginning assistants are often given specific tasks, such as inventorying a new donation to the archives, photocopying requests, or placing collection materials into acid-free folders and boxes. While these activities seem rudimentary, the assignments impress upon the student the need for attention to detail, disambiguation of source materials, customer service, and appropriate management of rare and unique primary source materials. As students gain experience, more in-depth activities are assigned; for example, a project may entail researching the number of collections in the repository that relates to an academic department's history and concurrently composing a historical statement for long-term use by internal and external stakeholders. Another project may include an analysis of oral history transcripts to determine the inclusive dates, subjects discussed, sensitivity of material, and readiness for dissemination. In these two examples, the student is expected to discover the depth of the source materials, analyze the information at hand, make evidence-based decisions, formulate a plan, and compose a result. At the outset of these projects, archivists instruct the students in information and archival literacy and information management. In time, as students gain proficiency, the archivist assumes a less direct role, allowing the student the opportunity to put into practice the critical-thinking skills learned. This is not a "hands-off" approach but rather a guided approach, wherein the student is expected to create a project plan, discuss with their supervisor, and then execute their plan. Advanced student assistants are given leadership roles and are expected to help less-experienced colleagues with basic to intermediate-level projects. These advanced students have demonstrated a repeated understanding of archival principles, information

literacy, communication skills, and problem-solving techniques. The designation as a student leader provides opportunities to reinforce information literacy knowledge and gain experience using their own knowledge to teach others.



Figure 6.1.
ASC Stacks

Table 6.2.
Undergraduate student worker activities and correspondence to *Framework* concepts and knowledge practices.

Undergraduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Undergraduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Reception Desk	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine patron general informational needs before referral to archivist.• Communicate special rules of collections use for unique primary sources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Searching as Strategic Exploration<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Determine the initial scope of the task required to meet information needs.• Information Creation as a Process<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Articulate the capabilities and constraints of information developed through various creation processes.

Undergraduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Undergraduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Creating preliminary inventories when collections arrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of content and media types • Description of information sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority is Constructed and Contextual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Recognize that authoritative content may be packaged formally or informally and may include sources of all media types.
Reproducing materials for patrons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of basic copyright law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Has Value <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Articulate the purpose and distinguishing characteristics of copyright, fair use, open access, and the public domain.
Paging collections for patrons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and use of collections content management systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Searching as Strategic Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Understand how information systems are organized in order to access relevant information.
Oral history transcriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition of interpersonal interview into a written format • Selection of controlled vocabulary, keywords, and inclusive dates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information Creation as a Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Recognize that information may be perceived differently based on the format in which it is packaged. • Searching as Strategic Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Use different types of searching language appropriately—controlled vocabulary, keywords, and dates. • Authority is Constructed and Contextual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Define different types of authority, such as subject expertise, societal position, or special experience.
Digital collections metadata creation and entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of primary source material to form basic description • Selection of controlled vocabulary, keywords, and inclusive dates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research as Inquiry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Organize information in meaningful ways. ◦ Draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information. • Searching as Strategic Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Use different types of searching language appropriately—controlled vocabulary, keywords, and dates.

Undergraduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Undergraduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Assist with exhibition preparations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to select and describe primary source materials• Ability to cite creators and primary source materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information Creation as a Process<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys.• Research as Inquiry<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Organize information in meaningful ways.• Information Has Value<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Give credit to the original ideas of others through proper attribution and citation.
Assist with outreach events (Aviation Day, Purdue Space Day, exhibition open houses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand importance of contextualization of primary source materials to various audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authority is Constructed and Contextual<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Define different types of authority, such as subject expertise (e.g., scholarship), societal position (e.g., public office or title), or special experience (e.g., participating in a historic event).
Design marketing materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop ability to convey activities of the institution creatively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information Creation as a Process<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Develop, in their own creation processes, an understanding that their choices impact the purposes for which the information product will be used and the message it conveys.
Donor interactions during special tours or events	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand the importance of contextualization of primary source materials to various audiences• Understand historical empathy and information creator point of view	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authority is Constructed and Contextual<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Define different types of authority, such as subject expertise, societal position, or special experience.• Information Creation as a Process<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Articulate the capabilities and constraints of information developed through various creation processes.

Undergraduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Undergraduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Assist with social media content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research and compose content for online interactions by institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority Is Constructed and Contextual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Understand the increasingly social nature of the information ecosystem where authorities actively connect with one another and sources develop over time.
Reference questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to search databases as well as use finding aids • Provide appropriate referrals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research as Inquiry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Determine an appropriate scope of investigation. • Searching as Strategic Exploration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Manage searching processes and results effectively.

Graduate assistants are expected to enact more advanced information literacy and pre-professional knowledge. The work of these students incorporates the experiential learning of their undergraduate counterparts while also weighing potential ethical concerns, processing of archival collection materials, creation of new scholarship, and more in-depth research interactions.

Table 6.3.

Graduate student worker activities and correspondence to Framework concepts and knowledge practices.

Graduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Graduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Process archival collections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange primary source material. • Synthesize new descriptive information. • Recognize uniqueness (or lack thereof) of content as a primary source. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority Is Constructed and Contextual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Use research tools and indicators of authority to determine the credibility of sources, understanding the elements that might temper this credibility. ◦ Acknowledge they are developing their own authoritative voices in a particular area and recognize the responsibilities this entails, including seeking accuracy and reliability, respecting intellectual property, and participating in communities of practice.

Graduate Student Worker Tasks, Knowledge, Skills, and the Framework		
Graduate Task	Knowledge and Skills	ACRL Framework and Knowledge Practice
Advanced Reference questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Effective utilization of multiple primary and secondary sources• Understand that gaps exist within the historic record and associated impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research as Inquiry<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources.◦ Draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information.• Searching as Strategic Exploration<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Utilize divergent (e.g., brainstorming) and convergent (e.g., selecting the best source) thinking when searching.• Information Has Value<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information.
Monitor reading room and provide reference service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assist visiting researchers.• Understand security procedures.• Answer reference questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Searching as Strategic Exploration<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Utilize divergent (e.g., brainstorming) and convergent (e.g., selecting the best source) thinking when searching.
Research and writing of new scholarship	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create new literature in traditional and non-traditional (digital scholarship) forms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Scholarship as Conversation◦ Identify the contribution that particular articles, books, and other scholarly pieces make to disciplinary knowledge◦ Research as Inquiry◦ Synthesize ideas gathered from multiple sources.◦ Draw reasonable conclusions based on the analysis and interpretation of information.

In addition, experienced student employees with interest in archival or cultural heritage careers are offered advanced opportunities such as assisting with exhibit design, traveling with the archivist to set up and conduct outreach displays, and serving as chaperones of archival artifacts during crowded donor special events. In the last three years, students joined the flight archivist in a special display in collaboration with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and several activities for Purdue’s Girls in Aviation

event and the annual Purdue Aviation Day at the Purdue Airport. By participating as assistants in these outreach events, student employees see outreach activities modeled, participate in their design, and practice interpretive and public history skills. Not only are these activities applying information skills in the real world, but they also serve as pre-professional training.

Reflection

Specialized literacies, such as primary source and archival literacy, within the work environment of archives and special collections connect the concepts learned in the classroom to those in the surrounding landscape. At Purdue, brief in-class surveys have found most students have their first experience visiting an archives or special collections library as part of a class. Indeed, many of the student employees of Purdue University Archives and Special Collections name a class as their introduction to the very existence of primary source repositories. This serves as a reminder that each interaction by an archivist or information professional, whether in the classroom or the repository, is a new opportunity to engage students in information literacy applications.

Use of information analysis, creation, and dissemination meets the *Framework* by embedding the student—when in the role of employee—in discovery, contextualization, learning processes, and research. As a series of co-curricular activities, the work conducted by the student in conjunction with the special collections librarian or archivist builds increasing competencies in information literacy. The workplace gives the student a laboratory to act upon and think reflectively about their knowledge while expanding skills learned in the classroom and in their work; concurrently, the experiential learning is taken from the workplace and put into use in the classroom. Student skills translate into long-term competencies and conceptual learning abilities.

Not all student assistants arrive in ASC with the goal of becoming an information professional, and, in fact, most graduate and pursue careers in their undergraduate field of study. However, by the end of 2017, six former student employees had attended a graduate program in library or information science following their undergraduate studies in humanities at Purdue University—these students included five history majors and one medieval studies major. All six now have found permanent employment in libraries, archives, special collections, or museums. One former student worker, Hannah Vaughn, stated in an interview:

I was able to experience the ASC through the lens of a researcher, and watching my fellow classmates work there, too, made me realize just how important my employment was. I was not only doing my job to preserve materials, but also to make collection materials accessible and understandable to anyone wishing to learn more about a certain topic. Whether it be from a researcher who expressed to me how much he or she enjoyed a collection or when a donor, such as Purdue alumnus and astronaut Captain Eugene Cernan, told me to keep up the good work, it truly was the people who helped foster my passion about ASC and compelled me to choose it as a career (Purdue University Libraries, 2017, p. 21).

A majority of these early career information professionals undertook internships to supplement their work experience, including four total internships at the Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institution. Each cited their experiences in the Archives and Special Collections as a motivating factor to apply. The ability to actively experience and learn in a functioning archives and special collections cements concepts learned in the classroom and at work; those experiences lead to a strong and successful internship, study abroad, and graduate school applications; in turn, early career professional position applications are strengthened by the foundations laid in their undergraduate endeavors. In each case and at all levels, the individual demonstrates their capacity to understand, analyze, and actualize information literacy concepts which they have practiced and, in some cases, become experts over the course of their student employment.



Figure 6.2.
Students at Smithsonian Internship

Conclusion

The ACRL *Framework* defines information literacy as the “set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (ACRL, 2015, p. 3). The work of an archive or special collections is inherently the work of information literacy. Every day, archives’ patrons engage in the reflective discovery information in our reading rooms or within our online interfaces. Student workers observe and participate in the acquiring of records and manuscripts and work alongside archivists to make those discoveries possible, experiencing both the process and the discovery. Thus, they actively experience in their workday how information is produced and valued. Student workers conduct

research and assist patrons in their use and citation of information, activities which are at the core of original research and the scholarly creation of new knowledge. Each student enrolled in postsecondary education is expected to study, learn, and expand their understanding of the world. As educators and information specialists, archivists and special collections librarians are uniquely qualified to establish active learning workplaces designed to complement curricular activities. By creating an environment built to impart educational growth, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills, information professionals offer unique opportunities for student learning outside of the classroom. Ideally, student employment acts not only as a rewarding, pre-professional work experience but a functioning information literacy laboratory. From the workplace to the world at large, these students are more prepared to evaluate information—its creation, analysis, and scholarly import and accuracy. Student work has inherent value—to the archivist, to the institution, and most importantly, to the student.

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